



Kara Lynn Russell

Until
Summer's
End

"We're here," said Greg, pulling to a stop in front of Kathy's apartment. Kathy leaped out of the car without waiting for him to get the door. She hurried up the stairs and Greg followed her, wanting to make sure she was all right. At the top he reached to take her keys, thinking to open the door for her. Kathy shrank back from him and Greg could have kicked himself. Kathy might put up a brave front, but she didn't need another confrontation with an angry male tonight.

He gathered Kathy into his arms and pressed her tight against him while whispering soothing things in her ear. A sob escaped her and he started to rub her back soothingly. "I'm sorry, Kathy. I didn't mean to scare you. It's just that I can't stand the thought of..." Greg broke off, not wanting to confess his true thoughts "...of you being hurt. I wish I had slugged Brad."

She laughed feebly. "Now you sound like Seth. I wish Brad hadn't spoiled our evening. It was all going so wonderfully before he showed up."

"Yes," Greg agreed fiercely. "When he started talking about you going back to him, I wanted to...I wanted to..."

"What?"

Greg proceeded to show her what he had wanted to do, kissing Kathy so thoroughly that he felt her go limp in his arms. This was not a mere meeting of lips, but an outpouring of raw emotion, resulting from his turbulent feelings about her. When Greg finally broke away, Kathy leaned back against the wall to keep from falling. Greg took the keys from her unresisting fingers and opened the door. "You'd better go in," he said. "Good night, Kathy."

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by

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

A book about family for my family, with a special thanks
to my dear friend Chris, my first editor and faithful
encourager.

Chapter One

Kathleen Gilbert sat on the park bench, drenched in June sun. It was chilly in spite of that, with a hint of dampness in the breeze and clouds on the horizon to the northeast. Kathy realized that a change in the weather was coming and wished she'd brought the sweater she'd left draped over the chair behind her desk at the library. Just then she saw Brad striding toward her across the park and Kathy forgot about the weather.

He'd come to give her bad news, she knew. Had known it from the minute Brad had agreed to meet her at the park for lunch. He always preferred to have lunch at the crowded, noisy Downtown Café. If he was conceding to her preference for the park, Kathy knew she'd be paying for it somehow.

"Hello, Brad." Kathy stood and greeted him with a kiss on the cheek, annoyed with herself for being so negative. Didn't her boyfriend deserve the benefit of the doubt, she asked herself? "You didn't bring your lunch."

"Nah," Brad said. "I've got a lunch thing with a client in a little while."

"How's the new job going?" asked Kathy brightly, sitting back down on the bench. Brad had recently become a salesman for a radio station in the nearby city of Eau Claire.

"Not bad." Brad loosened his tie and unbuttoned the top button of his shirt. "It's fun working for a radio station, but it's always tough being the new kid on the block."

You should be used to that, thought Kathy spitefully, *as often as you switch jobs.* She immediately felt guilty for her unspoken criticism.

"Listen, Kathy," continued Brad, "I gotta make this quick, otherwise I'll be late for this lunch thing. It's a pretty important client, and I don't want to blow it."

"I thought we were having lunch together," said Kathy through clenched teeth.

Brad flashed her his best smile, "You know you're always my favorite lunch companion honey, but business is business."

"Of course. You don't mind if I eat while you talk, do you?" Kathy unzipped her lunch bag and took a sandwich from the neatly arranged compartment.

"Hey, whatever makes you happy, sweetheart," said Brad, flashing that smile again.

Strange, in high school that smile made my bones turn to water. Even when I moved back after college and we started dating it still made my knees weak. Today Brad's smile seemed to make her faintly nauseous. Kathy looked down at the sandwich in her hand and wondered if she really wanted it.

Brad was talking again, but Kathy didn't listen much after the first few sentences. She knew the rest by heart. Brad was putting off their engagement...again. Money was his excuse this time. He'd just changed jobs, he was paid by commission, money was tight, etc. Kathy broke off a piece of bread and rolled it between her fingers. At least it wasn't the one that started off with "I met someone and I'm just not sure about my feelings..."

Kathy had known Brad wasn't ready to settle down when they'd dated in high school. When she'd moved back to Green Grove after graduating from college she'd thought herself lucky that Brad had wanted to go out with her again. But here it was almost four years later and she sensed that he was no closer to settling down than he had been in high school.

"Kathy, honey, you aren't saying anything. You're making me nervous, sweetheart."

Kathy switched her attention back to Brad. She regarded him coolly for a moment. He was the same as

always. Boyishly sincere, affectionate. He could make her feel like she was the only woman in the world when they were out together. The problem was that it wasn't so. They had broken up several times because Brad had wanted to date other women. He always came back to her in a few weeks, they made up, and it was as if nothing had happened. They'd talk about getting married, but Kathy was coming to realize that it was just that—talk. Any steps that would make marriage a reality were always sidestepped charmingly by Brad.

"It won't be much longer, I promise." Brad was holding her hand now. "By this fall I should have enough saved up for a ring. Not just any ring though. A big sparkler. Just for you. I'm doing this for you, Kathy. You deserve the best. Please say something," Brad pleaded.

Kathy opened her mouth to reassure him that she would wait. No one was more surprised than she by what came out. "I'm sorry Brad, but I can't wait until this fall. We've been playing this game since high school—one step down the aisle and two steps back. I can't do it anymore."

Brad's mouth dropped open. "Are you giving me an ultimatum?"

Kathy felt just as shocked as Brad looked. "I don't know. I guess I am, aren't I."

"Kathy, this is crazy. I just can't afford to get married now."

"Why not? I don't need a fancy ring. I don't even need a big wedding. We could elope. We're both working. We could afford a decent apartment. I see absolutely no reason to wait."

Clearly this wasn't what Brad had expected. He had always been able to wrap Kathy around his finger with a smile and a few kisses. "I won't be forced," he warned.

Kathy re-wrapped her sandwich and put it back in her bag with the rest of her uneaten lunch. "Good for you. I wouldn't want an unwilling groom. But I do want to get married. If you're not ready for that maybe I'd better look somewhere else."

Kathy rose to walk away, but Brad grabbed her arm. "Kathy, you can't be serious. You don't want to do this."

Gently, Kathy removed Brad's hand from her arm. "I'm sorry Brad, but I do. It's not so bad. We had a lot of good times together. But now I can see that I'm ready for something more and you aren't."

"But I can't imagine being married to anyone but you." Brad looked truly hurt now, but Kathy had seen this look before too and it didn't affect her this time.

"Then why don't you marry me?" asked Kathy. They stood there for a minute, the cool early summer breeze rippling though Kathy's short brown hair.

"I can't," said Brad finally as he turned away.

Kathy turned him back and softly kissed his cheek. "It's okay, Brad. I think this is for the best. Now don't you have a meeting to go to?"

Brad shook his head, as if waking himself, then looked at his watch. "I'm going to be late now," he said grimly.

"You'd better go."

"Okay. Well...I'll see you around Kathy." Brad turned and walked away, shoulders hunched and head down. Kathy watched him walk away and waited for her heart to break, but strangely, it didn't.

In a contemplative mood now, Kathy began to walk slowly back to the Green Grove Library where she worked as a reference librarian. The break-up with Brad had been completely unplanned, yet upon reflection she felt it was the right decision...wasn't it? Kathy knew that Grandpa Gilbert would say she should pray about it, and she agreed, but she still felt too shocked by what happened to put her feelings into words, even between herself and God.

So deep in thought was Kathy that she didn't realize she had wandered near the playground and was surprised to hear her name called. Looking across the wide space filled with swings, slides and other equipment, Kathy saw a man pushing a little girl on a swing.

"Kathy Gilbert? Is that you?" the man asked. He was handsome in a quiet sort of way with dark curly hair cut short. He was dressed casually in a T-shirt and khaki shorts and looked exactly like...

"Greg?" Kathy cried. "Gregory Yves? I don't think I've seen you since...since..."

"Since your brother's graduation party probably," finished the man she had just identified as her brother's best high school friend.

Kathy walked over to the swings. "Is this your little girl? I didn't know you were married."

Greg stopped the swing for a minute. "Yes, this is my little girl. Her name is Michelle." Kathy smiled at the tiny child with the golden braids. "And over there on the jungle gym is my son." Kathy saw a miniature version of Greg playing happily. "His name is Bryce."

Kathy was so busy looking at the children that Greg's next statement caught her off-guard. "And I'm not married. At least, not anymore. My wife died two years ago."

Kathy's head snapped around. She looked at Greg more closely and was struck by one thing. The laughing brown eyes of the boy she had known years before were changed. Now those eyes were tired. And endlessly sad. The rest of Greg was pretty much the same, but the eyes belonged to an entirely different person.

Kathy was kept busy the rest of the afternoon at the library across from the park. Later she regretted leaving her lunch uneaten as her stomach growled loudly in the quiet room. About mid-afternoon the children's librarian, Mrs. Stanhope, stopped at her desk and pointed out that the sky had become dark with clouds. "It was so bright and sunny this morning," Mrs. Stanhope lamented. "I wish I'd brought my umbrella."

"Well, you know about the weather in Wisconsin." Kathy repeated the popular joke. "If you don't like the weather here, just wait fifteen minutes. It will change."

Mrs. Stanhope laughed. "It'll change all right. It'll go from bad to worse. I'll bet it'll be pouring buckets by tonight."

Mrs. Stanhope's prediction came true. As Kathy straightened her desk at the end of the day it was indeed raining hard. Kathy sighed, regretting that she'd chosen to walk the few blocks from her apartment to work this morning.

As Kathy was leaving the building she saw Vera Kopilanski, a friend of her mother's. Vera had just finished checking out her books and was getting into her car when she called out to Kathy. "You aren't walking, are you, dear? Let me give you a ride home."

As soon as she was settled into the car and the usual comments on the weather had been dispensed with, Vera started to ask questions. "So how is your young man, Kathy? Will I be getting a wedding invitation from you soon?"

"No, I don't think so," mumbled Kathy.

"You young people," said Vera, shaking her head. "No one wants to settle down these days. I was married when I was seventeen and had three kids by the time I was twenty-two. You and Brad ever thought about having kids?"

"We haven't discussed it." Desperate to change the subject, Kathy blurted, "I saw Greg Yves in the park this afternoon. He has two beautiful children."

"Yes, a lovely family. Too bad about his wife though. She was killed in a car accident a couple of winters ago. The little girl was just a baby I understand. Tragic, just tragic." Vera shook her head. "She was a nurse, his wife. She was coming home from work late one night. That's when it happened. Icy roads."

Fortunately by that time Vera had pulled her big Chrysler into Kathy's drive. "Thank you for bringing me home Vera."

"Oh, it was no problem, dear. Tell your mother I said hello," called Vera as Kathy ducked out of the car and made a dash for the door.

Kathy lived on the second floor. As she was going up she met Amy Kramer, their landlady and her roommate's aunt. The women exchanged greetings.

"Kathy, I'm glad you're here. Someone has to drag that niece of mine out of her dark room. She's been in there most of the day."

"There's nothing strange about that. Gillian's either taking pictures or developing them," Kathy responded.

Amy smiled, obviously proud of her niece. "She'll be famous someday. But until then, make sure she gets some fresh air, okay?"

Kathy laughed. "Okay. Would you like to join us for supper?"

A blush crept up Amy's neck, surprising Kathy. "No, thank you. I—I have plans. I need to be going. You girls have a good night."

With a sigh of relief, Kathy closed the door behind her as she entered her apartment. She was dripping even from her brief dash through the rain. Kathy and her friend Gillian lived above Amy's interior decorating shop. To Kathy it was one of the best deals of her life. The rent was reasonable; Amy was a tolerant landlady, and a good friend to the younger women. To top it all off Amy had decorated and furnished the apartment herself. Occasionally they had to let one of Amy's clients view the apartment but Kathy thought this was a small price to pay for their beautiful home.

When she heard the door open Gillian poked her head out of the small room she had turned into a dark room. "Hi. How was your day?"

Kathy rolled her eyes and sagged against the door. "That bad?" questioned Gillian. "Why don't you get into some dry things and I'll finish up in here."

By the time Kathy had changed into a comfortable sweat suit and run a comb through her short caramel-

colored hair, Gillian had the kettle heating on the stove and tea bags tucked into cups. "Let's sit on the couch in the living room," suggested Gillian. "Go ahead. I'll bring the tea."

Kathy sank down gratefully on to the comfortable sofa. She studied the collection of photos scattered across the coffee table; Gillian's latest work. "I thought you were supposed to be developing the pictures from the Carlson wedding today."

Gillian came in from the kitchen carrying a tray with mugs of steaming tea and a plate of cookies. "I got done early," she replied. "So I thought I'd develop this roll that I took at the lake last weekend." Gillian was a freelance photographer. She did weddings, anniversaries, confirmations, and other social and family events as often as she could and also worked for the local newspaper when they needed her. "But there's nothing spectacular there so why don't you tell me about your day."

Laying the photos back down, Kathy accepted a mug from Gillian. "You're right," she agreed. "They're very good. Your work is always very good, but I see nothing spectacular."

Smiling, Gillian answered, "The spectacular ones are still in the dark room."

"Let's see them," urged Kathy.

"Not now," said Gillian. "I want your full attention then. Now you're wound up about something. Tell me what happened."

Kathy reached for an oatmeal cookie. "You really were ahead of schedule today if you had time to bake."

"Get real." Gillian rolled her eyes. "These are from the supermarket. Now quit stalling and tell me. It can't be that bad."

"I had lunch with Brad today," began Kathy.

"Uh-oh. A lovers' quarrel. Did you guys break up again?"

"Actually, yes."

Gillian put down her mug. "I'm sorry, Kathy. But don't worry about it. You'll get back together. You always do."

Kathy shook her head. "Not this time. I gave Brad his walking papers."

"*You* dumped Brad?" Gillian's mouth dropped open. "What happened?"

Kathy sighed and rubbed her forehead. "Nothing out of the ordinary I'm afraid. Brad put off our engagement again."

"So?"

"So I realized that he wasn't anywhere near being ready to settle down. I told him we either get married now or forget it."

"Apparently he didn't rush off to rent a tux," Gillian's smile softened her words.

"No," replied Kathy. "No, he didn't. He said he wouldn't be forced and I said I didn't want him if it came down to that. Do you think I was wrong to insist?"

Gillian stared thoughtfully into her tea. "I don't know. How do you feel?"

"Actually," Kathy hesitated, then went on, "I feel amazingly good. Is that bad?"

Gillian chuckled. "You'd prefer to be miserable?"

"No, it's just that...we dated for so long. I thought we were in love and that we would eventually get married. I should be devastated. Instead I feel..."

"Liberated?" suggested Gillian.

Kathy grinned. "Yes. I thought my heart would break, but instead it floated off like a balloon." She got up and refilled their mugs from the still hot kettle in the kitchen. As she settled back onto the couch, she continued. "But at the same time I'm sad. Not so much for losing Brad. I guess his games killed any tender feelings I had for him."

Gillian snorted. "I'm glad you finally realized he was playing games with you."

"What do you mean?" asked Kathy.

"Come on, Kathy." Gillian fairly bounced with indignation. "He manipulated you all the time. He'd get the hots for some weak-willed blonde, and he'd find an excuse to break up with you. Three weeks later he'd show up with flowers, looking pathetic so you'd feel sorry for him. Every time you tried to call him on his behavior he'd talk about getting married and you'd forget everything else. At least until he found a way to put off the engagement."

Kathy squirmed with embarrassment. It was painful to see that Gillian had long known what Kathy had just figured out. Well, maybe not just figured out, but had just gotten the courage to face. "Anyway, I still feel sad because this means that my dreams of a home and family of my own have just been set back."

"On the contrary," said Gillian. "I think they've just taken a step forward."

"I don't know. We know just about every available man in Green Grove and I can't think of one that I'm longing to go out with."

"You just haven't been looking," asserted Gillian. "Besides, Prince Charming may be just around the corner. You never know who you'll run into."

"Speaking of which," said Kathy, feeling anxious to change the subject, "I ran into an old friend today. Actually he was my brother's best friend in high school."

"Did he come into the library?" asked Gillian.

"No, I saw him in the park after Brad left."

Gillian made a face. "Bad timing. Is he cute?"

Kathy thought for a minute. "Yes. Yes, he is."

Gillian bounced again. "There. You should ask him out. He could be your Prince Charming."

"No," groaned Kathy. "He has two kids and besides I totally embarrassed myself when I saw him."

"He has kids? Then he's married?"

"No, a widower. I didn't know it and put my foot in my mouth."

“So what?” demanded Gillian. “I’m sure it was no big deal. Why don’t you ask him out?”

“Gillian,” Kathy cried impatiently. “Haven’t you been listening? He has kids! I’m not ready for that! Besides up until today he probably thought of me as his friend’s bratty little sister. Now he thinks of me as the woman with the foot in her mouth.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Gillian advised. “It couldn’t have been that bad. And maybe you aren’t ready for kids yet, but so what? You don’t have to marry this guy. Let’s face it. You need practice at dating again. It’s been so long since you’ve gone out with anyone except Brad.”

Kathy began to hastily clear the mugs and plate from the coffee table. “Forget it, matchmaker.”

“A summer fling,” exclaimed Gillian excitedly. “That’s just what you need.”

“No,” said Kathy flatly while brushing cookie crumbs into her hand.

“All right, all right, you win,” said Gillian. “Now that you’ve got it all out of your system let’s look at my photos. I got a great one of the island.”

“Sure.” Kathy carried the tray with the tea things into the kitchen and set them on the cupboard next to the sink. “I’ll be right there.”

Gillian didn’t mention Brad or Greg to Kathy again that night, but when Kathy had gotten ready for bed and was saying her prayers she included Greg and his family in them. Even after she settled into bed with the lights off, Kathy could still see the expression of sorrow in Greg’s dark eyes.

Chapter Two

The sun returned to shine the next day as Kathy settled in at her desk hoping for a quiet day so she could catch up on some work. But then the librarian who was supposed to cover the circulation desk called in to say that she had to stay home with her little girl who was sick, so Kathy had to cover the circulation desk as well as the reference desk.

About midmorning Kathy saw two small bundles of energy leap through the front doors. "Look, Daddy," cried the one with golden braids. "It's the lady from the park yesterday."

"So it is." Greg smiled at her as he also stepped through the door. "Do you think she could give you directions to the children's section?"

The little girl turned wide hazel-colored eyes to Kathy. "Can you?"

"Of course I can," said Kathy. "It's off to the right. Mrs. Stanhope is the children's librarian and she can help you find whatever you need."

Kathy searched her memory for the child's name. Something with M. Mary? Miranda?

"What do you say, Michelle?" prompted her father.

"Thank you," the girl chimed, a smile lighting up her chubby face.

Kathy smiled back. "You're very welcome, Michelle."

"I hope you have a computer," said the boy solemnly. His name was Bryce, Kathy was sure. Or was it Brian?

"Michelle, Bryce, you go ahead," Greg told them. "I want to talk to Ms. Gilbert for a minute. Remember to use your quiet voices."

"We will," the children yelled over their shoulders as they escaped to the children's section.

"It is still Ms. Gilbert, isn't it?" asked Greg when they were alone. Her full attention on Greg now, Kathy noted that he was smiling a slow, friendly smile. The tiredness she'd sensed the day before was gone and the sadness had retreated to the back of his eyes, but it hadn't disappeared.

"Yes, it still is Gilbert." Kathy affirmed. "I apologize for being so awkward in the park yesterday. It's just that I hadn't heard, and..."

Greg waved aside her concerns. "You were fine. Believe me I've gotten worse reactions. How long have you worked here?"

Grateful for Greg's understanding, Kathy answered cheerfully, "Almost four years. I was offered the job as reference librarian before I even graduated. I was really surprised to be singled out. They hadn't even finished building the library yet when they offered me the position."

"This looks like a great library. I wish it had been here when we were in school."

"Have you moved back to Green Grove for good?" Kathy asked.

"No," Greg shook his head. "I'm just here for the summer. I start a new job in the fall. I'll be moving to eastern Wisconsin then."

"What do you do?"

"I teach high school history. Following family tradition I guess." Both of Greg's parents had careers in education. "I have the summer off so I thought I'd visit with my folks and take a couple of classes at the university in Eau Claire."

Just then they were interrupted as a woman came to the desk to check out books. When Kathy looked up again, Greg was gone. He'd joined Bryce and Michelle in the children's room, Kathy assumed. She quickly busied herself at her desk, but her mind was not on her job, it

was on Greg. She wondered what it would be like to face the death of a spouse and single parenthood.

Later Kathy checked out materials for Greg and his children. "Did you enjoy the library?" she asked Bryce and Michelle.

"Yes, Ms. Gilbert," answered Michelle politely. Kathy could tell that she was the talker in the family.

"I liked the computer," added Bryce shyly.

To Greg, Kathy said, "You should stop by the farm. I know Seth would be glad to see you. He's married and has two boys now."

"Is he farming with your Dad?" Greg wanted to know.

"Yes. Seth and his family have moved into the big house and Mom and Dad built a house across the road. Now would be a good time for a visit since the spring crops are all planted and it's too early to make hay yet."

"Maybe I'll stop by this afternoon." The children were getting restless so they said their good-byes and left. A moment later Greg popped back in. "Kathy..." he said hesitantly, "maybe sometime you and I could have lunch together or something."

Kathy blinked, not sure of what Greg was saying. Was he asking her out on a date? "Um. I'm not sure," she said evasively. "I'm pretty busy this summer. I'll have to get back to you."

Feeling flustered, Kathy turned to a group of children waiting to check out books. Their frazzled mother was having difficulty keeping them in line so Kathy had an excuse not to look up again as Greg left.

Later in the day Grandpa Gilbert called, asking Kathy to check a book out for him. "I'll bring it over after work," Kathy promised. "I don't have to stay for closing today, so I'll be at the farm around two-thirty."

After work Kathy headed out of town to her family's dairy farm with a light heart. She loved going home. The farm had been in her family for generations. Currently it was home to three generations of Gilberts. First there was Grandpa and Granny Gilbert who lived in the snug